

DELJUS SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

NEWSLETTER

of the

DELIUS SOCIETY

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EDITORIAL

As some of us are aware, our President has been engaged recently in the preparation of a new biographical study of Delius and this is now published in 'The Great Composers' series by Faber and Faber. I think it hardly needs saying that past biographies of Delius leave much to be desired, notwithstanding the historical significance of some of them. Mr. Fenby's previous book 'Delius as I Knew Him', deals only with the last years of the composer's life, but those already familiar with it, know that he has a unique affinity with his subject, constantly illuminated by his extremely wide-ranging knowledge of music and musicians and all expressed with unimitable charm and humour. The book has 19 music examples and 57 illustrations from photographs, several of which are published here for the first time. The cost is £1.50 (postage on one copy is 11p. and on two copies 24p) from Faber and Faber Ltd., 3 Queen Square, London W.C., 1N 3AU.

The following additional information has been given to me by our Secretary:

"The book is to be published in America, but at present I do not have the date of publication.

"In the meantime, U.S. and South African members can obtain this book by sending the equivalent of £1.50 to Faber and Faber, plus 36 new pence to cover postage, by surface mail (airmail works out at more than the cost of the book)."

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It may be remembered that I have previously criticised the practise of expecting choirs to sing difficult modern scores from part music; a matter which should concern all those who hope for increased numbers of performances of Delius' major works. I was delighted, therefore, to receive the following letter from our President, which gives a practical illustration of the kind of situation that has to be expected until steps are taken to improve matters.

The full text of Mr. Fenby's letter is as follows:

"Your editorial comment in the Spring Newsletter on the consequences of using separate vocal parts in Songs of Sunset is much to the point, and as you invite further comment, may I add mine?

"I remember being called over to Bradford shortly before the Centenary Festival to take a rehearsal of Songs of Sunset with the Bradford Festival Choral Society when the then chorus-master, George Stead, was indisposed. It was immediately clear to me that, despite his admirable preparation in achieving the desired musical accuracy, his singers, particularly on the inner parts, had little understanding of their individual lines and their relation to the texture of each musical movement. We were dangerously near the concert and in one awkward passage, I fear, I was very hard on the contraltos. Suddenly a flushed and ample lady rose from their ranks and brandished a tattered piece of paper at me.

"But, Sir! How do you expect us to sing music of this kind - sometimes in pencil - from single parts like these!"

"Samples of each voice were then passed up to me; I was appalled. I can feel my humiliation to this day.

"I pleaded with the publishers subsequently, but in vain. Vocal scores of such a work, they said, would be prohibitive in cost and the demand so small they would never recoup their outlay. Provincial choral societies, to my knowledge, have since rejected Songs of Sunset through fears of insecurity involved in singing it from the single-part vocal material on hire. This, of long history, is but one instance of the unresolved problem of making available in printed form all the master works of Delius in which there are still most notable omissions."

One wonders if adding fifty copies of the vocal score of 'Songs of Sunset' to the hire library would be as 'prohibitive in cost' as the publishers maintain (twenty years ago this score was on sale to the general public for 12/6d per copy). I am informed that 'The Song of the High Hills' does not even have a vocal score! (This could be one reason for the very few performances it receives.)

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Many members will have heard with deep sadness of the death of Wilfred Brown, the possessor of a tenor voice of unfailing musicality and beauty of tone. Some of us well remember his singing of Delius songs at our concert at Leighton House many years ago. He always brought an especial sympathy to English music and lovers of Delius will not forget him. What a pity that he was not asked to record much more of this treasury, although no doubt the B.B.C. have a number of tapes hidden away in their sound archives, where they should not be allowed to remain hidden.

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On the same sad note, I have just received the following tribute to the late Hugh Alderman from our President:

"The news of the death of Mr. Hugh Alderman, a founder member and former President of the Delius Association of Florida, and an honorary member of our own Society, will come as a shock to those who met him either in Bradford in 1962, or more recently as guest at our dinner in London.

"What Hugh did for the Delius cause cannot be measured in human terms. The enthusiasm with which, in a busy life, he inaugurated and sustained the annual Festivals at Jacksonville, had to be experienced to be believed. It was prodigious. Our gratitude is the more profound when we realise that he carried on with unfailing verve often under stress of great physical pain. All members of the Delius Society here will join me in sending our deepest sympathy to his widow and son.

Eric Fenby.
President, Delius Society."

David Simmons also writes:

"Just before this newsletter went to press, I learned from Mrs. Emanuel of the death of Hugh Alderman of Jacksonville.

"As Mrs. Emanuel pointed out in her letter, 'he was a dedicated Delian, a founder of the Delius Association of Florida, and his loss is shared by all of us who were privileged to know him.'

David Simmons resumes: "Members of the Society will remember Hugh Alderman's visit to London some six years ago. The Society was able to arrange a reception for him at the Great Drawing Room at what was the Arts Council - a building about to be converted into a Police Court! It was also memorable for a performance by the Amici quartet of the Late Swallows movement from the Delius quartet which brought delight to the Society and very obvious gratitude from Hugh Alderman.

"Always an enthusiastic Anglophile, I had spent most of the preceding day with him. He was that charming mixture of enthusiasm and thoroughness which characterises so many of our American friends. Crazy about English church organs, he was always keen to get at Cathedral organs 'after hours' and he was equally committed in his devotion to Delius.

"He told me many little tit-bits which he was later to send to the archives of the Trust about Delius' Florida period and he was very proud when the L.S.O. visited Florida that he and the Society's Committee in London were able to put pressure on the management of that orchestra to play some Delius. It seems that they had not even considered the possibility, but in the end they got their requested Delius work. We will miss Hugh and his work but are sure that through his tireless efforts, the cause of Delius is stronger now in North America than for very many years."

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All queries, correspondence and contributions in connection with the Newsletter should be sent to the Editor at the following address:
19 Maple Avenue, Maidstone, Kent.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Thursday, Sept. 28th, 1971, at Holborn Library, Theobalds Road, commencing at 7.30 p.m., and presented by Derek Cox:- Correspondances - An excuse for Music and Poetry!
"A programme which suggests that the music of Delius can be better appreciated by placing his work in the context of the Symbolist movement in poetry, of which Baudelaire was the forerunner, Verlaine and Mallarme the exemplars and Debussy the unifier of all three."

MIDLAND BRANCH REPORT

6th November, 1970

In response to the request in the Spring Newsletter, Roland Gibson kindly gave us a talk on 'Delius in his historical context.' He showed that Delius' influence on later composers was limited (mentioning for example Bax and Warlock and film music) and compared this with the very extensive influence exercised by Debussy. Delius could only be regarded as a progressive up to 1905. An excerpt from Szymanowski's 3rd Symphony 'Song of the Night' was played, showing Delian characteristics. Reference was then made to Delius' pre-occupation with nostalgia and this was illustrated by the first three sections of 'Songs of Sunset' showing that this sometimes takes the form of lyrical autumnal nature music and at other times a human longing for lost love and happier days. The influences upon Delius were also touched upon and mention was made of Wagner, Richard Strauss and Greig. Finally, the influence of Nietzsche on Delius was discussed. The talk was most interesting and instructive and was followed by the usual refreshments during which several of the matters mentioned by Roland in his talk were further discussed. We are most grateful to Roland for a very stimulating evening.

21st May, 1971.

The last meeting of the season was the now traditional 'Musical Evening' where the Midland members meet purely for the fun of playing to their friends some specially rehearsed party pieces, which they would not normally 'risk' beyond their own drawing rooms. This year the event was held at Dick Kitching's home, because his piano is the 'grandest' and nearly all the items required its use. Once again it was a very entertaining and successful occasion with several light-hearted moments providing the right mood for the evening.

For the first ten minutes we were allowed to enjoy the evening sun by strolling Glyndebourne style around Dick's patio (?) and lawn (!!) accompanied by a glass of wine, which did much to fortify both the performers and the audience. A dramatic chord on the piano from Dick Kitching followed by the Delius Prelude No. 2, brought everyone to their seats and the entertainment was under way. After this, Dick was joined at the keyboard by Peter Trotman for two piano duets from Walton's 'Duets for Children'. The two pieces were 'Puppets Dance' and 'Trumpet Tune', with some unaccompanied ballet in between as the pianists changed positions. This was to allow Dick freedom of expression on the high notes in the trumpet part, and it should be said that any trumpeter who can keep pace with Dick's 'twiddly-bits' must be a genius.

Margaret Trotman then returned to Delius and sang four of his songs which had been prepared and translated by Peter Pears. Margaret had obviously studied these songs in some detail and the Delius style of phrasing came over very well. This was especially true of the 'Cradle Song' dedicated to Nina Grieg which was beautifully sung. The other

songs were 'Young Venevil' taken from a Bjornson poem, 'I-Brasil' with its definite Scottish rhythm and 'Homeward Way' with its nostalgic return to the Norwegian hills and valleys.

A clever piece of programme planning enabled Shirley Clover to follow with two of Grieg's piano pieces, 'Poetic Tone Pictures' (Op. 3, No. 1) and 'Waltz' (Op. 12, No. 1). As usual, Shirley's playing was quietly efficient and very pleasant to listen to. We then had the evening's only contrast in sound with a most popular wind duo between Peter Trotman (Horn) and Brian Dunn (Bassoon). For this item, Peter Trotman took Mozart's '12 Duets for 2 French Horns', transposed four of them for bassoon and horn and the result was a most pleasant sound.

Dick Kitching then gave us another interesting piano item when he played the original version of Percy Grainger's 'Country Gardens' (Handkerchief Dance). To this he applied the original tempo and markings and the result was fast and lively, not at all like many modern interpretations. It is interesting that this friend of Delius also dedicated this piece to Grieg. A composer who might be said to be more confused with than connected with Delius is Debussy, and it was two of his piano pieces that Robert Johnson selected as his contribution. He played 'La Fille aux Cheveux de Lin' and 'La Cathedrale Engloutie', giving an almost professional performance especially in the latter when he positively vibrated the piano lid. Jerry Rowe then provided a classical contrast with one of the settings of the Bach Chorale Prelude 'Nun Komm der Heiden Heiland', which Jerry made sound just as good on the piano as on the organ. The interesting thing about these last two items is that the Debussy piano pieces were rehearsed on the organ (Robert having no piano available for practice) and the Bach organ prelude was rehearsed and played on the piano!

After the usual excellent refreshments the evening was allowed to conclude in a more relaxed and light-hearted vein. Firstly Jenny and Jerry Rowe used the audience in some experiments with astrology and favourite composers. This was all very interesting but it did not prove very much except that Mozart was top of the Midland Branch 'pops' followed by Bach, Chopin and Delius; that a large proportion of composers were Sagittarians but Delius Society members weren't, and that my fellow Gemini character, Richard Wagner, and I had very crazy mixed-up personalities. A final musical exercise came from Brian Dunn and Peter Trotman with a bassoon and piano duet from J. Ord Hume's fantasia 'Carnival'. What effect this piece had on the straight-faced, tight-lipped Victorian drawing rooms I cannot imagine, but this performance in Nottingham, 1971, had to be stopped at least three times whilst both performers and audience regained their composure.

A final attempt at spontaneous madrigals was remarkable for the sight of Peter Trotman trying to conduct and sing all four parts at once! However, all in all, an excellent evening's entertainment in a most friendly atmosphere. Long may this tradition continue.

PETER THORP.

RARE DELIUS 'KOANGA' A WASHINGTON OPERA HIT

In three performances on Friday, Sunday and Monday, the Opera Society of Washington added to its very considerable 13 year stature with the first presentation in the United States of Frederick Delius's 'Koanga' - the first, in fact, of any of his operas to be staged here. What was more, the Delius work, with only three Covent Garden performances to its credit since its premiere in 1904 at Elberfeld, Germany, burst with tremendous impact on an audience unprepared for the moving impressionistic beauty of its score, and the very contemporary implications of its plot, both magnificently realized in the society's production at Lisner Auditorium.

The opera, set in a Louisiana plantation in the early 1800's, is bracketed by a prologue and epilogue a century later, so that the main plot is in essence a story told to a group of young girls by a conjureman. It deals with the purchase by a planter, Don Jose Martinez, of Koanga, a proud African prince and voodoo priest, who refuses to submit to slavery, but is persuaded to do so by his attraction to Palmyra, a mulatto slave girl also strangely drawn to him. Following Christian wedding ceremonies, the girl is stolen away by a jealous overseer, and Koanga escapes to invoke a curse on the plantation in weird voodoo rites. He kills the overseer, whose followers slay him, and Palmyra stabs herself.

Blend of influences

Although Delius was born in England of German parents, he spent his early years in Florida, and after some musical study in Germany settled in France. It is not surprising then that 'Koanga' blends the flavor of the South (there is a banjo in the orchestration, 30 years before 'Porgy and Bess' used one) with the impressionism of the French school, and a hint of the dark majesty of Wagner.

The result, however, is neither patchily variegated nor derivative. The score flows like hot, glowing lava, bright, forceful, and menacing by turns as the plot demands. It is a succession of stunning passages; the Monet-like quality of the girls' choruses in prologue and epilogue; the colorful, insinuating rhythms of 'La Calinda', a Creole dance which prefaces the wedding, itself a vocal ensemble of great richness; the palpitating voodoo rites and the encounter between Koanga and Perez, his rival; the love music for Palmyra and Koanga; the velvety orchestral interludes and an overpowering tragic scene which brings the opera to a close. Captured in music is the wild beauty and basic starkness of a time that no longer exists as such but is immediately and startlingly recognizable.

Musical discovery

Complementing this unexpected revelation (the first 'American' opera?) were the splendid musical performances under Paul Callaway's baton, and Frank Corsaro's superb production, which used film, projections, scrims, and misty light around the performers to speed the plot on its way.

From a visual point of view, Ronald Chase's films and projections, taken on the spot in the South, were breathtaking, and the lighting of Nannan P'rcher partnered them with continual effectiveness.

As Koanga, baritone Eugene Holmes rose to the demands of a grueling role with tremendous vocal and dramatic strength, and Claudia Lindsey's warm soprano and commanding stage presence made her a perfect Palmyra. There were outstanding performances too, on Friday, from Will Roy as Martinez, William McDonald as Perez, Joyce Gerber as the planter's wife, and Edward Pierson as the conjureman. Orchestra and chorus were of top quality.

Too much credit cannot be given the Opera Society of Washington for this spectacular re-examination of 'Koanga', which will and should lead to assigning the largely unappreciated works of Delius their rightful place in the musical spectrum. Perhaps the unrelenting efforts in the past of Sir Thomas Beecham and a few others in their behalf have at last reached fulfillment.

Louis Snyder.

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The New York Times - Sunday, Dec. 27th, 1970.

'KOANGA' - HIGH CLASS MINSTREL SHOW?
By Carman Moore.

There are actually two events taking place concurrently when Frederick Delius's opera about slavery, 'Koanga', is presented. The first is a rather handsome-sounding oratorio full of pleasant passages sonically equidistant, perhaps, from Wagner, Verdi and Grieg. The other is a well-meant but ill-conceived little play adapted by librettist C.F. Keary from George Washington Cable's Louisiana novel, 'The Grandissimes'. In part because it was the 19th century, a time in the arts when romance and exoticism still took precedence over research, 'Koanga' comes off as somewhat of a high-class minstrel show - Delius's music virtually never stopping to inject a black note into its parts and Keary's libretto too busy tripping over 'alas', 'nay' and Milton's grave to really take you to the plantation. The result, in spite of the competent solo singing and good looks of this American premiere by the Opera Society of Washington, is a messy, funny and, for non-students of history, dangerous contribution to the mythology of matters black.

Imagine, if you will, a post-Emancipation plantation where six white lily belles, tired of dancing all the day, prevail upon old Uncle Joe to tell once more the oft-told tale of how the uppity ways of Koanga recently-enslaved Jaloff (Wolof) prince and voodoo priest, were undone by the love of the tempestuous half-breed slave girl, Palmyra. The Wolofs, by the way, are an Islamic tribe of Senegal. Flash yourself back and hear the slaves singing such stinging indictments of slavery as:

We are pulling, pulling, pulling
Downy seeds as white as snow.
We are culling, culling, culling
Dainty heads of indigo.

or
Come out, brothers, come out
to cut the waving cane;
The moonlight shadows are faded
and the day is back again.
The humming bird is waking,
good brothers don't complain
So come once more and hasten
to the fields of sugar cane.

Imagine that one Simon Perez, the white slave driver, is unrequitedly in love with Palmyra. Say that, when ol marse Don Jose Martinez (wicked Spaniards!) orders him to break Koanga's will, Perez replies, "Alas, my master, none such as he can be made to yield. Over a wild and savage clan once he was Prince and Priest. His tribe were ever more ashamed did he but bend the knee."

When Don Jose cunningly sickens Palmyra - or rather pours her, potion-like on the voodoo prince, he sets off the conflicts which cause his wife Clotilda, frightened that Palmyra, secretly her father's child, would be marrying black (though not bothered that she is enslaved), to conspire with the jealous Perez, to abduct Palmyra and marry her up to Perez himself (operative love happens fast enough, but when the amour is Ethiop, you just put them together and stand back, like when Miss Match meets Mr. TNT). After Palmyra is kidnapped, Koanga escapes to the hills with other slaves, practices a little voodoo, returns and kills Perez and is himself killed. And so Uncle Joe finishes up his tale, and the verandah belles weep and recover under the magnolias.

What have we here? Amid white and European arrogance so rampant and slavery so horrid, a Delius (who ran a Florida orange plantation in the 1880's), Cable and Keary, by even writing pieces depicting a black as noble, come off, by comparison, as daringly compassionate. A young Delius in throes of developing a personal classical music style, treating his spiritual-singing field slaves to the corrective of some Verdi-Wagner-esque passages, spiced up with some Stephen Foster, Keary turning them into a kind of Greek chorus and letting Koanga - the American incarnation of Noble Savage - do a Samson Agonistes (cum Lycidas in the Epilogue).

Stack it all up and you have at the top two European intellectuals, Delius and Keary, disdainfully questioning how the next guy, the white planter, could be in cahoots with the even more vile slave driver who stands a rung above the un-Christian African prince voodooist, who at least is better than your common Congo chattel - the whole thing constitutes the very warp and woof of Western bigotry. Let it be said of Louisiana novelist Cable, best-known for his careful descriptions

in the 1860's of African music and dance in New Orleans, that he was driven out of the South for objecting to mistreatment of post-Emancipation blacks.

In Washington, there were also some problems last Friday. Conductor Paul Callaway simply could not get his off-stage chorus to sing on time nor was his orchestra negotiating their parts or staying under the singers. Bass-baritone Eugene Holmes, who acted well and looked marvelous in a splendid Prospero-style garb (which somehow survived the trip in the slave ship without mashing a feather), failed to show the tonal richness of which his voice is capable. But there were also some fine moments. As Palmyra, Claudia Lindsey, barring a strained high note or two, acted well and sang impressively-to-movingly in a rich, wet voice. Other soloists - Joyce Gerber as Clotilda, Will Roy as Don Jose Martinez and William McDonald as Simon Perez - also sang exceptionally well. Director Frank Corsaro made up for his stiff blocking of the singers with a total visual display which constantly fed the eye and kept to the spirit of the libretto. But the star of the production was designer Ronald Chase, who handled scenery as a series of gorgeous pastel film projections.

Attended here, over 70 years after its world premiere, "Koanga's" value resides almost totally in its music. Often played on the air is the Prelude to Act II, and it is a light and lovely piece of music. Though there is some appeal in the manliness of Prince Koanga and in the pluck of Palmyra, the libretto and story, unlike stock minstrelsy's 100 year purveying of the worthless Nigger myth, serve simply to fortify the modern myth of the superior Negro - the exception to the rule. A good laugh, they say, is good for the digestion, but I believe my meal would go down better with either a competent recording of the Delius score or with the same of Mahalia Jackson singing real spirituals.

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The Plain Dealer - Sunday, Dec. 27th, 1970.
(Cleveland).

THE ROAR OF THE CROWD IS FOR DELIUS

By Robert Finn.

An upsurge of interest in the music of Frederick Delius - something I have been promoting and propagandizing for years - seems to be in the making. Conductors are programming Delius more frequently and one hears more and more of them declaring their personal advocacy of his work. Henry Lewis, for example, told me recently of his own great admiration for the English master.

And best of all, the Washington Opera Society, under the leadership of two more Delians, conductor Paul Callaway and stage director Frank Corsaro, has just given the American premiere of Delius' beautiful slave opera 'Koanga' before three sold-out and cheering houses. Honolulu, of all places, will hear Delius' operatic masterpiece, 'A Village Romeo and Juliet', next season.

'KOANGA' has had only a handful of performances since its premiere in 1904, but it is nevertheless a moving and beautiful work. In truth, it takes the rhapsodic music of Delius to make C.F. Keary's libretto palatable today, for the opera's text reads to a modern ear almost like a minstrel-show parody: "The indigo fields are awaiting your care, so the sickle truly test ere you pause for rest," etc. etc. etc. Keary's Victorian notions of what went on among the Negroes on a Southern plantation 140 years ago are quaint, to put it mildly.

But Delius transcended all this with his masterly score, which reflects and illuminates the drama, making it not only credible but gripping. Delius is known for the harmonic richness and emotional expressiveness of his music, but it is surprising how much dramatic power he mustered in many pages. And in the commanding figure of Koanga, the African prince, voodoo priest and plantation slave, he created a character of genuine pathos.

The music flows in a continuous stream, with melodic lines usually sung by the orchestra or doubled by the voices. Delius admirers will recognize his orchestral fingerprints in the frequent bucolic touches with woodwind solos, in the rich chromaticism, and the sense of continuously evolving musical line.

Delius was no oom-pah orchestrator. His orchestra buoys up the voices on a tide of sound, making it almost mandatory for the listener to study the libretto beforehand, since most of the words do not come through clearly.

The Washington production, which I saw on a recent visit, was both innovative and imaginative (those terms are not always synonymous). Beyond a few prop chairs there was virtually nothing at all standing on the Lisner Auditorium stage. But there were three retractable scrim screens on which a constantly changing kaleidoscope of atmospheric, semi-abstract or abstract color projections were thrown.

These worked quite well in suggesting the opera's decadent, moss-hung atmosphere, though one did detect a desire on the part of Corsaro and film specialist Ronald Chase to 'compose' a slide show in rather the same sense that Delius 'composed' a musical score. The projections succeeded in direct ratio to their abjuring any attempt to compete with (and thus distract from) Delius.

This projected scenery technique has all kinds of marvelous theatrical possibilities, many of which were realized in this production. But one hopes that as the technique is refined the projection-makers will resist the urge to overdo things. Suggestion and restraint are the keys to success.

The Washington cast was headed by two fine black singers, Eugene Holmes as the proud Koanga and Claudia Lindsey as the mulatto girl Palmyra. William McDonald, Will Roy and Joyce Gerber were fine

in supporting parts. Callaway's conducting allowed the full sonority of Delius' orchestra to sound forth yet never blotted out the singers, and the playing of the orchestra was quite idiomatic.

This production of 'Koanga' could prove a historically valuable occasion both for its innovative staging and for the impetus it hopefully will give to revivals of other Delius operas. If ambitious companies would look into 'A Village Romeo and Juliet', audiences would find themselves in Sir Thomas Beecham's pungent phrase, 'stupefied' by its beauty.

Sociological footnote: 'Koanga', an opera on a black theme, with a largely black cast and produced in a city with a black majority in its population, drew a virtually lily-white audience at the performance I attended.

Comparative footnote: Lisner Auditorium was sold out for three performances of this practically unknown opera. In Cleveland we cannot fill Severance Hall for two performances of such a well-known item as 'Cosi Fan Tutte'. Operatically, we are indeed a depressed area.

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The New York Times - Sunday, Dec. 27th, 1970.

'KOANGA' - SAVED BY THE MUSIC
By Harold C. Schonberg.

Originally the Opera Society of Washington was going to stage Virgil Thomson's 'Mother of Us All'. (Correction: the opera which was to have been performed was 'Four Saints in 3 Acts'). Difficulties of one kind or another ensued, and the production was scratched. What to substitute? Frank Corsaro, who was to direct 'Mother', happens to be a Delius-lover. He suggested 'Koanga', which had never been staged in the United States - nor, indeed, in many other places since it was composed in 1897.

'Koanga?' The 'Calinda' episode is known, and has been recorded several times. The pre-war Delius Society album (Vol. 1) did have the closing scene. But to almost everybody, 'Koanga' was a completely unknown quantity. At least a few of us had heard the concert version given by the Delius Society in Jacksonville, almost 10 years back. I had, and the other week went to the Music Library to read a score and refresh my memory. No score. Not even a libretto. Nor was Boosey and Hawkes, which publishes Delius, of any help. Whatever material Boosey and Hawkes did have was in Washington. A libretto, however, was available there, and it was promptly mailed to me.

It is an unusual libretto, adapted from an episode in George Washington Cable's novel, 'The Grandissimes'. Probably it was the first operatic libretto in history to deal with the plight of the Negro. The action concerns a slave named Koanga who revolts and casts a voodoo spell over the plantation. He then kills the overseer who is trying to seduce his wife,

and is flayed alive. His wife joins him in death. Considering its time and place, this was strong stuff. And, of course, it is of particular relevance to-day.

But one reads the libretto by Charles Francis Keary with a sinking heart. It is written in the worst lit'rary elegance of the period, of the "But hark, she comes", variety. Slaves in the field sing such lines as "We are pulling, we are pulling/Downy seeds as soft as snow;/ We are culling, we are culling/Dainty heads of indigo" - which have to be the lines least likely ever to have been sung by Negroes in the field. Koanga has such lines as "My bride thou shalt soon be, ere clouds conceal the moon".

From the beginning there was doubt about the libretto. Sir Thomas Beecham and Edward Agate revised it; and the production in Washington's Lisner Auditorium on Dec. 18 had a few more revisions. Director Corsaro has never been a purist and he inserted some action that strengthened (or so he thought) the basic idea of the libretto. For instance, when Koanga is brought in, near death, a priest stands by with a Bible. Palmyra, Koanga's wife, scornfully knocks the Bible from his hands to the ground. That is not in the libretto (nor is the priest, for that matter). Certain words, such as 'nigger', have been dropped. As a literary work, the libretto is a period piece and must be accepted as such.

But at least Koanga himself rises above the stereotypes of the libretto. He is bigger, much bigger, than the white men in the opera; he has authentic power and dignity. Delius, it must be remembered, lived in Florida for some years and had plenty of opportunity to observe the plight of the black man. What his observations were, it is hard to say. In later life he did not speak much about his American sojourn. But he would not have set 'Koanga' to music had he not had sympathy for the hero.

The music is interesting and frequently beautiful. Surely the interlude leading to the epilogue is one of the great things in Delius - sweet, sad, penetrating, voluptuous in its chromaticism. Another thing worth noting about the score is its Wagnerism. Probably no composer of operas in the last half of the 19th century could avoid the influence of the Mighty Richard. The ensemble that ends the first act of 'Koanga' calls to mind the 'Meister-singer' Quintet; and in the last act there is a stark, almost note-for-note quotation from 'Gotterdamerung'. And the long Palmyra aria over the body of Koanga is a sort of Immolation Scene.

Wagnerisms aside, the score is in the familiar rhapsodic Delius idiom. Poignant melodies flash by and disappear, while the harmonies slither from tonality to tonality. Does any composer have a greater number of altered chords per measure? One doubts it. The thing that saves 'Koanga' and the other Delius music from becoming cloying was his aristocratic musical mind. The modulations are not done for the sake of modulation, as so often in Franck, but as part of a constantly shifting tonality.

And the music, as in the voodoo scene, can build up to real strength. Delius, it should not be forgotten, was not only the composer of the orchestral vignettes by which he is best known. He also was the composer of 'Appalachia' 'Sea Drift' and the 'Mass of Life', powerful, large-scale conceptions.

It would be unfair to discuss the Opera Society of Washington's production of 'Koanga' without mention of the staging. Frank Corsaro decided to concentrate on projections. He sent a photographer to New Orleans to get appropriate material from which were made many color slides. Corsaro, Ronald Chase (scenery and film designer) and Nananne Porcher (lighting effects) got together and worked out a system by which the slides could be manipulated and seen through an outside scrim. Before the conductor, Paul Callaway, even lifted his baton, a series of projections suggestive of the Old South were flashed. Then came the music, and the curtain went up on the Prologue. This was fabulous. As seen through the scrim, figures moved against and into a three-dimensional illusion that actually seemed to be in the antebellum South. The Opera relied heavily on this through-the-scrim effect. In the voodoo scene, Corsaro introduced fire, smoke, blood a huge staring eye, a swirl of destruction. It was only in those scenes where the scrim was lifted that the production became flat and literal.

But Corsaro was handicapped by the limited resources of the Lisner Auditorium. He claims that, given the proper equipment, anything can be done. In addition, projections are less expensive than actual scenery. This production of 'Koanga' so often brilliant in its use of new lighting and film techniques, is a bit of the future. We are going to have more and more along that line; and if the medium is as flexible as Corsaro indicates it is, it can leave conventionally staged opera far behind. 'Koanga' gives an idea of how it can be done. Surely it was the most imaginative use of projected scenery ever accomplished on an American operatic stage.

The opera was extremely well received at its Washington premiere. As Corsaro is such an admirer of Delius, it may be that - thanks to the success of 'Koanga' - we shall be hearing other Delius operas. The most logical would be 'A Village Romeo and Juliet', though those who know 'Fennimore and Gerda' will be putting in a pitch for it. It may be that the Delius operas are rather special fare, not to everybody's taste. But they contain too much lovely music to be neglected; and, if the behaviour of the 'Koanga' audience is any indication they still have enough to fire up the listener. I'd go an awfully long way to hear 'A Village Romeo and Juliet'. Its a beauty.

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PRESSED FOR CASH, OPERA SOCIETY STILL PUMPS
LIFE INTO AN OLD ART

By Herbert Kupferberg

If opera has become irrelevant, the Opera Society of Washington doesn't know it.

In giving Frederick Delius' 'Koanga' its U.S. premiere last week, the enterprising company staged a production that swung with all the latest multimedia techniques. Further, it found an opera that, although written in 1897, deals with an astonishingly contemporary subject - a Negro first accepting the white man's ways and then contemptuously reclaiming his African heritage. Most important, it restored life to some beautiful music by a neglected composer.

Delius, who died in 1934 at the age of 72, is one of music's most lonely and eccentric figures. Born in England of German parents, he avoided the main musical centres and spent most of his life in a rural retreat in France, Grez-sur-Loing. Aside from a few brief orchestral pieces, his music has been little played even in England, but a small cult has always called him a genius. During intermission at the 'Koanga' premiere here, about 50 members of the International Delius Society solemnly gathered in a downstairs lounge to toast their man in champagne and salted peanuts.

Learning of America

Before he settled in France, Delius spent several years in America, first running an orange plantation in northern Florida, then teaching music in Jacksonville and Danville, Va. He knew Negro legends and music well and he based his opera on a novel by George Washington Cable about an African tribal prince named Koanga, sold into slavery on an American plantation who accepts servitude out of love for a mulatto girl, Palmyro only to reassert and redeem himself by rebelling.

The English libretto is unfortunately clumsy and phrased in the high-flown operatic English of 1897. But Delius has set it to rhapsodic music that in its intensity and continuity suggests Anglicized Wagner, though its lighter and more luminous than the German species. Slave choruses and a recurring banjo effect in the orchestra gave 'Koanga' a distinctly Negro flavour, and several scenes are extraordinarily affecting: a marvelous quintet that ends Act 1, a doleful ensemble of blacks smitten by a mysterious plague, and a radiant benediction pronounced by a women's choir at the end. And throughout the opera, the vocal passages are linked by instrumental interludes of surpassing beauty.

Substitutes for Scenery

With all this, why has Koanga never before been performed in America - and very few times elsewhere? One reason undoubtedly is that Delius'

five operas have been called static and nondramatic. But Frank Corsaro who directed *Koanga* and Ronald Chase who designed it, have used projections and illumination to overcome this deficiency. Dispensing with physical scenery, *Koanga* was instead enacted before and behind several scrims, upon which were flashed various images - some stationary, some moving.

The images were the result of Mr. Chase's taking a color camera to Louisiana and shooting in the region where the story is laid - canebreak, forest, ante-bellum mansions. Interspersed with an occasional surrealistic eye or a spreading bloodstain the pictures added a vivid dimension to the story. The chorus, more-over was never seen, its voices instead pouring from two speakers at either side of the stage.

All these effects would mean little, of course, if *Koanga* did not have excellent singers, and these were very much present in Eugene Holmes, a commanding figure with a commanding voice as the tragic African prince; Claudia Lindsey, a splendid Palymra; and Will Roy as the villainous plantation owner.

'*Koanga*' was selected almost accidentally by the Opera Society. They had originally scheduled Virgil Thomson's 'Four Saints in Three Acts' to be done with a Negro cast. But difficulties arose with the composer, and the production was scrapped. So the society telephoned Mr. Corsaro, known for his daring productions with the New York City Opera Company, and asked for suggestions.

"They told me they had a black cast and no opera" recalls the peppery director. "So I said, 'O.K., lets do *Koanga*. No, its not a boys' camp in the Adirondacks; it's an opera'."

To Hobart Spalding, director of the Opera Society, '*Koanga*' is the kind of opera that justifies his organization's existence. In its 14 years the society has come up with a remarkable number of out-of-the-way works. In 1967 it gave the premiere of Alberto Ginastera's '*Bomarzo*' which has since played around the world; for the opening of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts next fall it has commissioned another opera by the Argentinian composer, Beatrix Cenci, based on Shelley's play.

"Our object", says Mr. Spalding, "is not to put on standard operas in a standard way. We want to do newer and more experimental works, plus new and different versions of the old staples."

Like most American operatic groups outside New York, the Opera Society is more a production unit than an opera company. It puts on three or four operas a year, hiring outside singers and assembling a chorus and orchestra for each one. In preparing '*Koanga*', for instance, Mr. Spalding and his associates found it more expeditious to hold rehearsals in New York, where Mr. Corsaro and the singers were located, rather than bringing them all to Washington.

Musical challenges aside, Mr. Spalding's organization faces a continual need to finance itself merely to remain in existence. 'Koanga' cost \$80,000 to put on. Even playing at capacity for three performances at a \$12-a-seat top, it barely returned one-third of its production cost. The difference comes from an occasional foundation grant and from contributions by private donors. The society's basic problem, as with similar organizations, is finding a large enough audience to support opera, especially opera that ventures beyond the basic A.B.C.s - Aida, Boheme, and Carmen.

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Time - Jan. 4th, 1970.

ANTE BELLUM AIDA

That supreme musical watercolorist of English post-Romanticism, Frederick Delius, is known best to-day for such delicately tinted orchestral tableaux as Brigg Fair, Over the Hills and Far Away and On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring. Last week at the Opera Society of Washington, his Opera 'Koanga' made it clear that Delius, who died in 1934, could also be effective with strong colors on a broad canvas.

A voodoo Aida of sorts, 'Koanga' is set in the ante bellum South and tells the story of an African prince (Koanga, also a voodoo priest) sold into slavery on a plantation. He falls in love with a mulatto slave girl, and eventually makes a bold - but tragic - dash for freedom. Koanga's moods and moments range from a tender love scene to a fiery voodoo incantation. Everywhere, Delius' music flows effortlessly in and out, over and under the libretto (based on the novel 'The Grandissimes' by George Washington Cable) with the caressing quality of rhapsody at its best. Save for a few instances of post-Wagnerian schmalz, the score is astonishingly original in its chromatic colorations and declamatory singing style.

'Koanga's dramatic strength makes it all the more remarkable that this was the first staging ever of a Delius opera in the U.S. The man responsible for the revival was Stage Director Frank Corsaro, on loan from the New York City Opera. He reinforced 'Koanga's quality of poetic make-believe and pantheistic sultriness perfectly by using slides and films (photographed especially in the Louisiana bayous) as well as surrealistic light patterns. So well did production and opera blend, so superb the singing of Baritone Eugene Holmes and Soprano Claudia Lindsey in the lead roles, that sellout audiences erupted into shouting ovations at the end.

Corsaro has his keen eye on other Delius operas. As he points out, no less an authority than the late Sir Thomas Beecham, Delius' friend and greatest champion, considered 'A Village Romeo and Juliet' and 'Fennimore and Gerda' infinitely superior to 'Koanga'.

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REPORTS: FOREIGN

WASHINGTON

When its projected revival of Virgil Thomson's 'Four Saints in Three Acts' fell through, the Opera Society of Washington, determined to use some of its black singers, came up with an even more exotic novelty to open its fourteenth season on December 18: the American premiere of Frederick Delius' third opera, 'Koanga', a tragedy of slave life in antebellum Louisiana. The performance at Lisner Auditorium therefore attracted many musicians and critics from around the country and abroad, as well as the expected delegation of devoted Delians. Judging from the ovation at the end, the Opera Society's 'Koanga' made something of a hit.

But it is not hard to see why the opera has languished. The libretto, adapted by Delius' friend, C.F. Keary from the 'Grandissimes', a novel by George Washington Cable about the hopeless love of an enslaved African prince for a beautiful mulatto, is curiously static. What little action there is bogs down in stilted, pseudopoetical verbiage that Delius has set in rambling arioso, only occasionally rising to real eloquence. If short on drama, the score is long on atmosphere. Superimposed on a base of slow-moving Wagnerian chromaticism spiced with Debussyian woodwind arabesques, Delius uses stylizations of the slave songs and dances he heard as a youth in Florida to evoke a sensuous Spanish moss-covered world of plantations, boyous and voodoo incantation. Aside from the lilting strains of 'La Calinda', employed prominently in Act II, Delius' idiom is yearningly nostalgic; over a full evening it can get to be cloying.

To provide a visual counterpart for all this tone painting, and to cope with some quick scene changes, director Frank Corsaro relied on photographic slides taken by designer Ronald Chase in Louisiana. Projected on and through scrims in slowly dissolving montages, these often achieved magical results during the numerous choral/orchestral interludes. But the continual, restless changing of backdrops during the scenes themselves proved distracting.

Musically, the Opera Society served Delius well. Eugene Holmes looked handsome as Koanga, and his strong baritone coped manfully with the sometimes cruelly high tessitura. Even more impressive was the Palmyra of Claudia Lindsey, with her velvety soprano and quietly dignified stage presence. Will Roy as the slave-owner (Martinez), Joyce Gerber as his wife (Clotilda) and William McDonald as the evil overseer (Perez Laso) sang well. Except for some out-of-tune moments in the strings and a few bloopers from the brass, the orchestra played beautifully under Paul Callaway.

Karl F. Reuling.

